

THE LAST TRAIN TO PHILIPSBURG

John Boston

Michael Mattix boarded the train at exactly 4:45 PM. It was raining out hard, very hard. The rain was supposed to last all night and into the morning. It was barely fifty degrees outside. He had decided to take the train rather than drive into the city and deal with the traffic which seemed to be getting worse by the day. It sounded like a great plan at the time and all things being considered, it was the better option. He had to find somewhere to park, hope there was a space available, and pay for it. He heard someplace that half of the city's uniformed police officers did nothing but write tickets. Not catch bad guys or open cold case files, no sir. Their job was to bring in as much money as they could for the city, so they could waste it on dumb shit.

The conductor helped him with his small suitcase and he took his briefcase with him. An attendant put his suitcase over his head and he sat down in his seat.

He hadn't ridden a train in years and with good reason. They're slow as hell and you could get stuck sitting next to some dimwit for the entire trip. Just too many unknowns for a man of his years to come out smiling.

Once he left the city, the stops were few and far between for two hours until they got to his stop. The entire trip was supposed to take a total of four and a half hours. Of course, in *train speak* that was a polite way of saying five hours or more. These damn things never ran on time and when they did, it was almost like it was cause for celebration. He watched the raindrops hit the window. It wouldn't be too much longer before the sun went down. He just hoped he could stay awake for the entire trip. *Once the sun went down, all bets were off.*

He wasn't really paying attention to who was boarding unless they were young and pretty. Eye candy never hurt anyone. He had bought a two-dollar paper, *yes two dollars*, and was thumbing through the classifieds when he heard the steps outside fold up, and a minute later, the train started moving. Trains don't accelerate very fast at all. He was in the outer suburbs already and most of the urban mess was behind him. Just cookie-cutter houses.....*and cookie-cutter people inside of them.*

They had a food car somewhere on the train. He might just get himself a coffee at some point. Maybe a Danish. His body was going to hell in a handbasket anyway, may as well finish the job.

The big problem the rail car business has had since its inception is the simple fact that people don't like other people. Especially people who aren't like them. We like people who are like us. Hardworking, clean-cut, easy on the eyes. When we have to sit next to someone who doesn't share our values, or our cherished views on life, things can become.....*repelling* very quickly.

He was glad to see his car was relatively empty, except for some young suit's a few rows up ahead. He was about to look at the obituaries in the paper when *he* sat down next to him.

The man was a few years younger than him. Mixed something or other. His mother would have said he was from the islands. Not white, but not black either. Something in between. A human mutt.

The guy looked strung out on something. He was probably hiding from the cops. The guy sat down in the row across from him. Not the window seat, the aisle seat. He figured he would get his coffee, then simply come back and move to another empty row. He figured the guy probably didn't even have a ticket. He figured the guy would ask him for money. Guys like that never have any money. No, homeboy's bread didn't quite look completely baked. The guy had a monkey on his back. This could get ugly quickly.

The conductor entered his car and began scanning passenger's tickets. He figured this would be a good time for home boy to make his move. Much to his surprise, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a ticket. The conductor smiled and scanned his ticket. Michael then gave him his ticket. It was scanned and returned. Michael went back to his newspaper. He was keeping an eye on the crackhead. You just never knew what stupid thing they were going to do. He could see him trying to take the train hostage with a bomb he made out firecrackers. Instead, he did something even worse. Something that no matter how hard Michael tried to ignore, he simply couldn't. It was just too much. This asshole actually started crying! Right in front of him. The man just continued to sit in his chair, rocking back and forth and sobbing almost uncontrollably.

Now Michael wasn't without feeling or conscience. A crack head was still a crackhead, but Michael was a Christian after all and no matter how revolting this man was, he was still a human being and deserved some kind of sympathy. He knew it was a mistake, but somebody had to help him.

He leaned over and put his paper down.

"Son.....are you okay?" he asked in his best dad voice.

The man didn't even look at him. It was almost as if he didn't hear him. He just kept rocking back and forth and sobbing. Nothing about this was adding up, *but that's what happens when you have crack for breakfast.*

"Do you want me to get the conductor?" asked Michael.

The man continued to ignore him. Michael was now more than just a little irked, he was worried. *This poor bastard was more screwed up than a crash test dummy.*

Michael got up out of his seat. The man just reached over to him and grabbed him. Michael looked right in the man's eyes. They were only inches apart. Whatever this man felt, he could almost read it in his eyes.

This poor guy was scared shitless.

"Look son, let me go and get the attendant. Maybe they can help you."

"Ain't nobody can help me." the man said softly.

"What's wrong?"

The man just looked at Michael like he had two heads. The man said a lot with that look....an awful lot. Kind of like: *How much time you got honkey?*

"I'm in a lot of trouble," he said softly.

"Well, do you want to tell me about it?"

"Just go back to your seat mister. Sit back in your seat and forget you ever saw me, cause if they see you talking to me, then they gonna come for you too," he said.

"Who's gonna come for me?"

"The devil.....that's who," he said softly and continued to sob.

"Look son, let me get you some help. There's no reason for you to suffer like this," said Michael.

The man just started sobbing harder. Michael wasn't sure if he was on something or just plain nuts.

"I saw something one night. Something I shouldn't have. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Could have been anyone.....but it was me. I knew they were gonna come for me and do me like they did the others. Ain't no escaping them, man. Once they got it in for you, it's over. Don't you see? *I'm a dead man walking.*" the man said.

Michael knew he should just let this one go. There was nothing he could do for the man, he was too far gone. Michael should just have let him sob, only he didn't. Now he was up to his eyeballs in this thing. He could have just picked up his belongings and left for another car. But, that would be the easy thing to do. That's why society had gone to hell in a handbasket because everyone did the easy thing.....instead of the right thing.

"I'm going to get some food? Would you like something?" asked Michael.

"That girl back there. The one in the last row next to the door. I think she's one of them. When you walk by her, look at her eyes. Then you'll know. If they are the blackest eyes you ever saw, then you know she's one of them." said the man.

"What's your name?" asked Michael.

"Donovan. Donovan Sinclair. Not that it matters. I'll be dead soon anyway."

"I'll be right back Donovan, with some sandwiches."

He wasn't sure if he heard him or not. Donovan was transfixed on the girl in the last row.

"My name is Michael."

He calmly walked by the girl, who was wearing her earbuds. Nothing about her was out of the ordinary. Cute girl. Probably on her way out to the college at Wellington, which was several stops away.

Michael bought the sandwiches and some sodas. He passed by a rail car attendant and was tempted to tell him about Donovan, but he decided not to. He felt that he would be betraying him in some weird way. Donovan had confided in him, even if he had done it reluctantly. Michael had to win his trust if he was going to know the full story. If something did ever happen to him, that information could be vital to finding his killer. Michael opened the sliding door to his car and sat back down next to Donovan, who seemed to have calmed down. He smiled as Michael handed him his sandwich and soda.

"What do I owe you?"

"Nothing. You can buy next time," said Michael.

"Good. I ain't got no money."

"Why don't you tell me the whole story. Somebody should know."

"Michael, you don't understand. That girl is one of them."

"One of who?"

"The people who are going to eat me."

Michael put down his sandwich and looked at Donovan.

"I'm sorry.....*what the hell did you just say?*"

"I caught them one night. I outran them. That was two months ago. I ain't stopped running since. Every time I think I'm free, they find me. When one shows up, they all show up. That's how they roll."

"Why would they want to eat you?"

"Cause that's what they do. They eat people. I thought they were just homeless people at first. You never really see them, you just see their tents and cardboard boxes. If it's just one or two you can fight them off, but it's the packs you got to watch out for. They are the real deal. *They can strip a man's skin off him in seconds.*"

"Donovan.....are you schizophrenic....or maybe bi-polar or something like that?"

"No man. I wish I was. See, I don't even know if they're real or not. I thought maybe I was imagining them at first. Maybe I was just crazy. Then they found me. Almost killed me at a restaurant bathroom. Good thing I had my knife with me. I killed one of them. I don't feel bad, 'cause I don't think they were even human."

Michael knew he had to get this man some real help, as soon as humanly possible, before he hurt himself or somebody else. This was a little more than old Michael could handle.

The train pulled into the MENLO PARK station. Michael got up and said he was going to use the bathroom. He went into the food car and found one of the attendants. Michael figured he had to do something, hopefully, he could help Donovan before it was too late. He didn't have time to rehearse any of it, he was going to have to wing it.

"Excuse me, sir, I believe we have a bit of a problem here," said Michael.

The man looked up at him. He seemed almost annoyed by the fact that he had to talk to one of the passengers.

"What's wrong?"

"Well, the young man sitting next to me. He's in very bad shape. I was wondering if there was anything you could do to help him?"

"You like he's having a heart attack or something?"

"No, no nothing like that. It's more his mental condition. He actually thinks there is someone on board the train who is going to eat him." said Michael, doing his best not to sound crazy himself.

"Eat him? Like a cannibal?"

"I guess."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know. He needs help, more than I can certainly give him. Do you have security onboard the train?"

"Plainclothes once in a while. Usually not. Gang bangers usually don't ride trains."

"I see. Is there anyone on the train who can help him?"

"Has he threatened you?"

"No. I don't think he's a danger to anyone, except himself."

"So then, he's not bothering you." said the attendant.

"No....I just feel so bad for the man. Insanity must be the worst thing in the world. To not have any control over your own thoughts. It's the worst kind of torture."

"Mister, our policies are very clear: unless an individual has made threats against you, we cannot remove them from the train. We can't even ask him to change seats. I don't know what you want me to do."

"Son, I've been through a major earthquake. I was in Mexico a few years back. See at first, it's just little tremors, no one really pays much attention to them. Then the big one hits. The 8.5, or 9.0. The one nobody ever sees coming. The one that destroys everything. I'd just hate to be around that guy when he finally erupts. It isn't going to be pretty." said Michael.

"Mister, this is a passenger rail car, not a hospital. Until he starts bothering the other passengers or making threats, there's not much I can do." said the attendant and went back to scanning tickets.

Michael was flustered but knew it was pointless to continue. He left the attendant and walked back to his seat, through another car. Donovan was sitting in his seat. Michael felt the train slowing. An announcement came over the passenger intercom:

"NEXT STOP IS WALLINGFORD"

Michael sat down next to Donovan. He just sat in his seat and looked at the floor.

"You okay, Donovan?"

The man said nothing and just looked up at the ceiling.

"Donovan?"

"I used to be just like you, before they started following me." he said. He stood up and grabbed his bag. Michael stood up with him.

"Good luck to you son. You'll be in my prayers," he said and put his hand on Donovan's.

"Thanks, man. It's nice to know there are a few decent people left in this world."

Michael turned and saw the young lady standing next to them. Donovan's expression quickly changed. He started shaking. The train came to a complete stop. Michael wasn't sure if the girl was waiting for him to move, or what. There was another exit closer to her seat. He studied the look on her face. Her expression had changed as well. The closer she got. The less attractive she became. The smell on her was almost unbearable. She could have been a pretty young lady, but she looked like she hadn't showered in months. It was the look on her face, the blank, almost hypnotic look. It was almost as if she were transfixed by him.

The woman actually started drooling.

Donovan turned, then spun around and punched her right in the face. The girl staggered back and fell into a nearby seat. Michael looked around the car, but there was no one left. No one was around to witness what had just happened. Donovan quickly ran out of the train and onto the platform. Michael watched him through the window. He lost sight of him, then saw him running down the platform as fast as he could, with a few people chasing after him. He watched the girl walk out onto the platform and talk to a well-dressed gentleman wearing a top hat.....a real, honest-to-goodness top hat. It had been years since he had seen someone wear one out in public.

The girl turned and pointed right at Michael. The man looked up at him. Their eyes met for just a second.*and just like that, Michael was now part of the game as well.*

The man made some kind of weird hand movement, almost as if he were blessing Michael. He didn't know what to think of this. Several people got off the stop at WALLINGFORD as well. Mostly well-to-do types. Not the type of people who noticed anything except the shine on their shoes and money in their pockets. They weren't going to be much use. Donovan was on his own now. Michael could only hope he made it to safety.

The train closed its doors and a minute later, it was on its way again, slowly building up speed. It was supposed to be a leisurely trip, going at a very leisurely speed. After a few minutes, the lights were gone and it was near darkness outside. Michael sat back in his seat and tried to forget about the last forty-five minutes. It was as if it hadn't happened. A few new faces came on board. Younger professionals. The next stop was WINCHESTER COMMONS. That was a big one. It was a hub for several other rail cars. It was coming up in twenty minutes. The look that girl gave him was something right out of a horror movie. It was like there was nothing there. The girl had the emptiest eyes he had ever seen. Like there was no life left in them at all. Drained away and replaced by something else. Something very cold and dark. Made him shiver just thinking about it. He wanted to call somebody, but it occurred to him he had no one to call. His son lived in another state. There wasn't much he could do. He and his wife had divorced six years ago. *Irreconcilable Differences*.....a very broad legal term for a very concise, simple problem. You wanted to strangle the person you are married to. That's what it came to. Either he left, or they were going to kill one another. His wife found a new man. Good riddance. He never even sent her a wedding card. He can have her. He had only dated a few times and nothing ever became of it. He would die a single man, like so many others his age. He never found the love of his life.*if there is such a thing.*

Still, the loneliness was better than being stuck with the wrong person. That was the worst-case scenario. Anything was better than that.

He just couldn't get the smell out of the car. The stench on that girl was enough to make him gag. He picked up his briefcase and suitcase and went into another railcar. One that had passengers. One he didn't feel so alone. He couldn't believe there was no one he could talk to. He had a few friends, but they were more like acquaintances. They were good to talk about baseball or work, but nothing like this. The older he got, the more acquaintances he had and the fewer real friends he had. At times like these, you really needed to have friends. Maybe he would text his son, just to see what he was up to.

He opened the door and sat down in an empty row of seats. There were several people in the car. On their phones, on their laptops. Doing their best to ignore everyone around them. He hated what society had turned into. Everyone had become so detached from reality, it was like they were internet videos as well. Nothing about them was real or had any substance. Their entire existence was geared towards getting likes or thumbs-ups. Whoever invented social media, understood the American public better than anyone in American history. They knew exactly what we were.*and what we were not.* It was a much different world than when he was a boy. Just because society changes, does mean it changes for the better. In many cases, it is just the opposite.

He opened a magazine he had paid nine dollars for and began to thumb through it. He wasn't sure how he became aware of it. Maybe it was the smell. That horrible, nauseating smell, that smelled like burnt death. Maybe it was the constant weaving and bobbing of the rail car. He could almost sense it before he knew exactly what was wrong. His senses may be rusty, but they certainly weren't gone. No sir. *Michael instantly knew that something was wrong.*

He picked his head up and looked around. That's when he saw the two bums just staring at him. He put his magazine down and stared back. They had the same lifeless, blank stare the girl had. Michael knew that whatever Donovan had been involved in, had now found its way to him. He put his magazine down and looked away for just an instant. When he looked back up, they had turned away and were now looking out the window. There were several people seated next to the bums. Michael couldn't figure it out.

Jesus, am I the only one whose nose is working around here?

The two men got up and walked past Michael. They didn't look at him or say anything. Michael almost had to hold his breath, so he didn't vomit.

The remainder of the trip to WINCHESTER COMMONS was uneventful. The train slowed as it approached the platform. It was well lit. He watched the passengers get off and go about their lives. The time they spent together seemed too short. They would never get to know one another. The train would stop at the platform for five minutes. He figured now was as good a time as any to use the men's room, before everyone got on board. He had to take everything with him, so it took a few minutes, even though it was right outside. He got back to his seat as the new passengers were embarking. He looked out the window and seated on the platform was the same girl Donovan had punched. Her face was a swollen mess. There was another man with her as well. Both looked like derelicts or junkies. Both looked like they hadn't showered in months. *The wind had been taken right out of their sails.*

He stared back at them. He could see them right through the window. The girl raised her hand and just started waving. He wasn't sure who she was waving at. Was it him? How the hell did the girl get here before the train got here? That didn't make any sense. She would have had to get a ride, hit the turnpike, then beat traffic to get here before we did, find a place to park, walk over to the platform and sit. Seems almost impossible, yet there she was.

Michael was surprised to see very few people getting on board the train at the station. Most were going to take the Orange Line to the Central Station, back in the city. WELLINGTON was the next stop and that was a good ten minutes from here. Most would be going the opposite direction, from the college to the Orange Line. The last stop was Phillipsburg, where his car was parked. It was a lonely spot, with few trains even stopping there anymore. The cars were bound to thin out between the two stops.

A woman in her fifties sat down next to him. She looked like hot garbage. She didn't have any luggage or anything, which he immediately thought to be very odd. She didn't even have a purse. What woman her age didn't carry a purse? No phone either. No, this old bird was traveling on the fly. It wasn't just her lack of belongings that made her stand out, rather, it was her complete lack of.....anything. The woman just stared off into space. She wasn't looking out the window, she

was just staring right in front of her. It was as if she was in a trance. He watched her out of the corner of his eye, carefully thumbing through the magazine. He noticed her nose started twitching. It was almost as if she was trying to get the scent of something....*or someone*. She turned and looked directly at Michael. He put his magazine down and stared back at her. The woman was almost grinning. She had this bizarre, twisted grin on her face that stretched from ear to ear. She motioned for Michael to come closer. He leaned in but was still far enough away so he could react.

"The wages of sin is death," she said and slid back into her seat.

"NEXT STOP IS WELLINGTON. ORANGE LINE AND RED LINE DEPART DAILY FROM WELLINGTON." said a conductor.

The train slowed to a crawl and came to a complete stop a minute or so later. He watched the old woman get up out of her seat and exit the train. He was glad she was gone. That old bird gave him the creeps.

"Lights were on, but nobody was home." he thought to himself. Most, if not all of the passengers departed at WELLINGTON. The train was stopped for nearly ten minutes. He got up to use the restroom once more and sat back down. He looked out the window and could see several homeless people sitting on a bench, directly underneath the light. Michael was almost certain he had seen one of them on board the train less than half an hour ago. They were all just sitting, motionless as if they were sedated. One of them opened his mouth and let out some kind of horrible scream. Even on the train, he could hear it. The man who screamed was pointing right at Michael!

He looked closer. The man just continued to make these horrible noises. It was almost like the man was marking him, for others to see. They all looked like homeless bums. The kind of people who lived in tents and shot heroin all day. The kind of people who had stopped taking their psyche meds. *The kind of people who had become completely, totally detached from reality.*

The train started to inch forwards. Slowly at first, then with ever increasing speed. He wondered if any of them had made it onto the train. He wondered what they wanted with him. What if Donovan was correct? What if they did eat people? People, who eat people.....were they now a protected underclass of society? With each passing year, it seemed like older, white, middle-aged people like himself were now the enemy. The people who worked and built this country were now the ones the media said were responsible for all of society's ills. Michael thought the only enemy of America was the mainstream media.

I wouldn't believe any asshole on TV if they told me water was wet!

He looked around the car. One woman was sitting in the back. Just one. That was all. Those freaks could storm in here and he'd be surrounded in seconds. Who the hell was going to help him? Michael was now very worried. He still had almost two hours to go before he arrived at his stop. a lot could happen in two hours. He could disappear from the face of the earth in two hours. He decided to move to a car with people. Normally he would have just enjoyed his solitude, but tonight was different. Tonight, he actually wanted to be around people, as much as he despised them. Once in a while, they were needed and tonight was that once in a while.

He walked through several cars. There was hardly anyone on board. He stopped at the fourth car in front of a group of twenty-somethings. He could see they were discussing something. He made certain he was far enough away not to intrude, but close enough to be seen should something go down.

Michael had only been in one fight in his entire life. It was at a car wash in 1989. Some monkey just walked by and kicked the door of his brand new jeep. Just kicked it....for absolutely no reason. The jeep was only about a week old. Kid must have thought he was making some kind of grand statement. The kid must have thought he had gotten away with it. He was a ways behind him, the kid never saw him. He ran around the corner and was almost to the street. Michael waited for the kid. He turned just in time to see Michael kick him in the groin as hard as he could. The kid dropped to the ground. Michael kicked him one more time while he was on the ground, then grabbed one of the kid's shoes and took it with him as a souvenir. He threw it over the fence, into a pile of trash. Let the little fucker go and find it. Maybe he can find some decency while he's at it. He figured the kid would call up all of his gang banger friends and shoot the place up, but Michael drove by in his jeep. He looked down at the kid who just looked back at him. He was still collapsed on the ground, holding his groin, like that was going to do anything. He'll never forget the look on the kid's face. He couldn't believe this had happened to him. The kid tried to say something, but Michael just flipped him the bird and drove off. That was it. It wasn't really a fight at all. He had never been involved in a physical altercation like that in his life. Maybe his actions were a little over the top, but someone had to knock some sense in the little turd. Michael had let him off easy. It could have been far worse with someone else. He almost thought of it as doing the kid a favor. That was 30 years ago when he was a young man. Now he was a balding, slightly overweight middle-aged, knocking on retirement age. He wasn't in much condition to do anything except dial 911. He looked around and noticed that no one else had entered the passenger car. Maybe this was all in his head. Maybe Donovan was just plain nuts. Most people nowadays are just plain nuts. Some hide it better than others, but most are too far gone to cover their tracks.

He closed his eyes. It was almost eight o'clock. He was usually in bed, reading a book. Or watching TV at his house. He was tired. It had been a long day. He figured he could do this for another six to eight months, then he would have to retire for good. These long days were beginning to wear on him.

"NEXT STOP DANBY". said the conductor. He had dozed off and was trying to regain consciousness. He looked out the window and could see two men just pointing at him on the platform. He was curious about what they wanted. Why were all of these homeless people so interested in him? What the hell did they want? He closed his eyes and tried to forget about them.

"NEXT STOP FULLERTON."

Michael got up and gathered his belongings. He knew he had to talk to somebody. He had veered off course and had detoured into the Twilight Zone. He tried calling his son, but it went right to voicemail. There was no one else. He was alone in this world. It was just him and the crazies. He walked through the railcars without any rhyme or reason. He was tired and needed his own bed. He walked into the food car and ordered a sandwich. He ate it in front of a young black girl. She smiled at him and seemed polite, but so few young people had any substance or character these

days, most couldn't even hold a conversation. She looked like a college student, maybe he should go that route.

"Does the constant shaking bother you?" he asked.

"You get used to it."

"I don't think I could ever get used to this."

"You want anything else?" she asked

"Are you in college?" he asked

"I was. No point in going anymore. Too much money for a piece of paper."

"That sounds very true. When did the world get so screwed up?"

"I'm sure it's always been screwed up, there was just no internet or mass media around to expose it."

"Maybe. It just seems like when I was your age, the world was a simpler place."

"There was a lot of evil in the world back then too. It was just hidden and out of sight. Evil is always there, hiding in the shadows, waiting to pounce, like a hungry cat. You just never know when you're going to come face to face with it." said the girl as she closed up her sandwich cart.

Michael took his sandwich and went back to a passenger car. He sat down and ate half the sandwich. The young lady didn't do much to ease his worried state of mind. He hadn't smoked in years, right now a cigarette would do wonders.

"NEXT STOP DALTON'S CORNERS."

They are out there. As sure as the sun is going to rise and shine, they are out there, waiting for him to emerge. He didn't know who they were or what they wanted, but he was sure they wanted him. They emerged from the shadows. The shadows hide so much. Whatever they were, they lived in the shadows, coming out only to feed. He could see them on the train. He could smell them. They smelled like garbage, because in many ways, that's exactly what they were, human garbage. Maybe human was giving them too much credit. They were something else entirely. Like the humans that failed the quality control testing at the factory.

"NEXT STOP PIEDMONT."

The stops came and went. A few hardy souls got out and resumed their journey. Michael couldn't believe how tired he was. He thought about getting another cup of coffee, but then, he'd be exhausted and unable to sleep when he got home. His group of kids had departed, he was alone now in the car. He tried to stay awake, he made it about ten minutes, then started dozing off again. He had been up since four-thirty this morning. He was dreaming of falling asleep in his own bed, behind locked doors. He kept a shotgun in his closet. He had bought it years ago and

would occasionally take it out and play with it. He had plenty of shells with it. He wished he had it with him on the train. Maybe the garbage on the platform might think twice about doing anything if they knew what buckshot would do to a human body.

"NEXT STOP ROCKHAMPTON. OUR LAST STOP IS PHILLIPSBURG IN TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES."

Michael was glad he was almost home. He grew tired of watching the freaks on the platforms. It was almost as if they were following him. Guiding him.....*herding him* towards his final destination. They were going to have a problem in Rockhampton. The only way into the village was over a bridge that was closed for repairs. The train was the only way in or out of town while it was being repaired. Good luck getting through.

The train slowed down and stopped. Michael looked out the window and could see an empty platform. He was glad the crazies had lost him. He was beginning to get worried. The train started lugging itself forward. He was in and out of consciousness. He quickly came to when he realized he had to be awake, or he could miss his stop. He would hate to open his eyes a few hours later and realize he was a hundred miles away going in the opposite direction from Phillipsburg.

He had only seen one attendant in the last few hours. He didn't understand what they were doing? Aren't they supposed to be checking tickets? Aren't they supposed to give a shit?

He closed his eyes, just for a second, and when he opened them, there were five people seated across and in front of him. He hadn't even heard them come into the passenger car. He closed his eyes, then suddenly he stood almost straight up. It was the smell that woke him up. He had smelled the same thing earlier.

Dear God.....what the hell is wrong with these people? How do you let yourself smell so horrible?

Hippies.....derelicts.....homeless.....drifters.....they had different names, but they all meant the same thing: *trouble, with a capital T.*

He tried not to stare, but he couldn't. They were young and old. Black and white. They all seemed to have one thing in common: they were all fucking nuts!

None of them were doing anything but staring off into space. Finally, an old man looked over at him and said:

"The wages of sin is death, my son."

"Your skin is going to melt like candle wax in hell. You just watch." said another man.

He said it so coldly, without any emotion, it just didn't sound right.

"May the rains of Nazareth cleanse your filthy soul." said a black woman behind him.

Pretty soon, the entire railcar was saying it in unison. They were all losing their collective minds together.

"Each of these people is crazier than the next!"

Michael got up and pushed one of them aside. He opened the door to the next rail car and saw several of the passengers he had recognized from the platforms.

"The wages of sin is death. The wages of sin is death."

They sounded like a broken record. All of them just mindlessly repeating the same phrases over and over. They didn't even seem to comprehend what they were saying. They were just parroting the words. He saw one of the attendants in the next rail car. He grabbed his belongings and ran.

He opened up the railcar and slammed the door shut. The attendant just looked at him. He gave Michael a very puzzled look.

"Everything okay there sporto?"

"Yes. How much farther to Phillipsburg?"

"Not far, like five minutes. You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. I just need to get home."

The attendant was doing nothing but playing with his phone. He was completely oblivious to what was happening. Michael was being surrounded. The train had turned into a cattle car and he was the cattle.

He looked around the railcar. There were three people seated. One of them just looked at him, then looked away. They weren't going to be much use if things went south. He was on his own, like always.....he was alone. He just didn't want it to end like this. He wanted to go out on his terms. He had worked so hard to get to where he was now, it seemed like such a waste.

"We all face death alone. No matter how many people are beside us. Doesn't make any difference. You always face the grim reaper by yourself, with no one by your side. Maybe that's why I don't have any friends because, in the end, it's just you and death. One on one, with no one by your side."

"Huh?" said the attendant, looking up from his phone.

"You get philosophical in your older years. Just wait, someday, you'll be the weird old guy on the train," said Michael.

"Sure man, whatever you say," he said and went back to ignoring Michael.

THE LAST STOP FOR THIS TRAIN IS PHILIPSBURG. LAST STOP IS PHILIPSBURG.

Michael could feel his heart beating, racing. His chest was having a hard time containing it. He had no idea what was going to happen once the doors opened and he got off. He looked around for some kind of weapon, but on a train, there aren't any. He thought about dialing 911, but what would he say? He would still have to get off the train. He thought about Donovan and how they had turned his life upside down as well. He didn't want to die, but he didn't want them following him either. He knew he had to make a stand, he was just too old and slow to come out on top. Getting old sucks.....going soft is even worse. The train stopped and he was expecting the worst. He got off first. There were only a handful of people left on board the train. He walked as fast as he could over to the poorly lit parking lot. He made certain he had his keys in his hands and his doors would be unlocked before he reached it. He would have to move quickly if he was going to come out unscathed. He knew the foul-smelling degenerates were behind him now, closing quickly. He unlocked the doors. He would simply open the door, throw his things inside and lock the door. He'd be out of here in less than ten seconds. He looked behind him, there were three of them rapidly approaching, chasing their next meal. It would be very close. It might boil down to a matter of seconds. A young man was out in front. He would be the one who would do the fighting.

Michael got to his car, opened the door, and threw his things inside. He turned, just in time to see the young men walking past him. Two were on their phones, while the third one just smiled at him as he passed. They were just.....talking.....on their phones. Like any normal, young person would do.

He got inside his car and turned the key. It fired right up. He turned on the heater and defroster. His heartbeat had finally slowed to an acceptable pace.

There would be no murder this evening. There would be a life-altering type of incident. There would be nothing, but going home to an empty house and going to sleep.

He was almost angry at himself for being pulled into poor Donovan's sick, twisted fantasy. He was clearly suffering from some sort of mental illness. The worst part is, he had actually convinced Michael it was real. The fact that none of it made any sense didn't matter. Schizophrenics just make it up as they go. They don't have to follow the same rules the rest of us do.

He pulled into his driveway. It was almost eleven o'clock. He was turning into a night owl.

He let himself in and locked the door behind him. That was it. His big adventure was over. His big *imaginary* adventure was over. He couldn't believe he had fallen for it. He thought homeless people were going to eat him. He was almost laughing at himself now. The whole thing was so ridiculous, yet he bought it, hook line and sinker. Somebody his age should have known better.

He put on his pajamas and hopped into bed. It had started raining out and was coming down pretty good by the time he fell asleep. The rain always put him to sleep.

He awoke the next morning at six forty-eight. He rolled back over and tried to go to sleep, but it was no use. Once he was awake, there was no going back. His body wouldn't let him. He got out of bed and made himself a pot of coffee. He poured himself a cup and started sipping. The house

phone rang. He should have disconnected it years ago. Nobody but idiots on the other end looking to sell him some useless product. He should have just let it ring.....but he didn't.

"Hello?.....Hello? Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying." he was just about to hang up the phone when he heard the voice.....not just any voice.....*the voice*.

"Michael? Is that your name?"

"Who is this?"

"We are friends of Donovan. You know Donovan, don't you? Such a wonderful fellow."

"What do you want?" asked Michael who was now almost trembling.

"Just want you to know we ate him last evening over a roaring campfire. Used his bones to make a soup. We just want you to know that you're going to be next. We're going to strip off your skin and gut you like a deer. That is the price you pay for your sins. That is the price to get into heaven."

Michael quickly hung up the phone. He ran into his closet and grabbed his shotgun, making sure it was loaded. He sat down in front of his TV and ate a bowl of cereal with his shotgun next to him. From now on, wherever he went, it went with him.

Cereal and buckshot.....cereal and buckshot. A match made in heaven. But, how do you kill something that isn't even alive in the first place?